

Easter Sunday April 12, 2009
Calvary Presbyterian Church
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Acts 10:34-43
Mark 16:1-8

In most editions of the Bible, including our pew Bibles, there are more footnotes than text in the last chapter of Mark. In the other gospels, the Easter story is a drama in three acts—at least five in Luke’s version—but in Mark, there is only the discovery of the empty tomb. Act I, and nothing more.

By the middle of the second century, Christians already recognized that there was no ending to Mark. In Greek it is even more obvious than it is in our English translations—the last verse seems to end in mid-sentence, as if the writer had been interrupted by something and never got back to finish it. Early Christians tried to remedy this problem, by first writing the shorter ending—which doesn’t sound like it belongs at all, and doesn’t even get a verse number in our Bibles. And then, maybe a century later, they tried a longer ending—one that sort of summarizes all the accounts found in the other gospels. Those of you who were here during Lent may be suspicious that I just don’t want to deal with the business about “picking up snakes” in verse 18, but let me assure you that even the very first translator of the scriptures, Jerome, in the 4th century, was already convinced that the long ending just doesn’t belong there. The best ancient manuscripts just stop at verse 8. Most commentaries on the gospel don’t deal with either of the endings at all.

It may be that the last page of Mark was lost—think about those paperback books that show up at yard sales—lots of them are missing their covers and perhaps a last page or two. Ancient papyrus was brittle, even when it was new, and, there was no such thing as a truly “hard bound” book in the first century. That may be. But it’s also possible that **this** was the ending that Mark intended. Let’s listen to the account of Easter morning from the gospel according to Mark: Mark 16: 1-8.

End-less

Everything about this non-ending is unsatisfactory. Where is Mary weeping in the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses? Where is that footrace as Peter and John hurry to see what the women are blabbering about? Where is the drama of Matthew’s earthquake? Where are those disciples on the road having their ears burn as the risen Lord explains it all to them? Where is the locked upper room where Jesus suddenly appears and breathes the Holy Spirit into the frightened disciples? Where is the glorious ascension scene where Christ vanishes into the clouds? This just will not do at all.

We all know how stories are supposed to end—the hero is triumphant in the end; after a multitude of disastrous adventures which seem to be hopeless, good overcomes evil, love triumphs over all obstacles, and peace and justice are returned to the land. You’ve been to the movies. You know how it should go. You would have hated it if Simba was left wandering in exile while Scar ruled over the Pride lands. What kind of a story would leave the Prince married to one of Cinderella’s step-sisters? How could we ever get to “happily ever after?” I saw on the nightly news this week that one business that seems to be thriving in this time of economic recession is the writing of romance novels. They can’t keep them on the shelves at Barnes and Nobles—everyone wants to immerse themselves in a love story that is sure to have a happy ending. Even if it doesn’t quite square with the world that we know—or maybe especially because it doesn’t reflect the real world—but rather the world as we want it to be. Tragedy is out of style. We expect conclusion from literary works—all the unknowns in a story accounted for AND at least the illusion of a happy ending. We’re not satisfied with anything less.

Each of our gospels tells the same story, but each writer has put the accent marks in different places. In Mark, the accent is on discipleship. The accent is on how hard it is to follow Jesus. The accent is on disciples who fail him—over and over again. The twelve chosen disciples just never do get it. They bumble along making bad assumptions and asking dumb questions. Matthew and Luke tidy up the disciples’ reputations, offering plausible reasons for what they do and say, and shining the light on their best moments. They want the disciples who follow Jesus around Galilee to have the stature that they will get afterwards, as they lead the early church. When Peter is preaching that uplifting sermon to the gentiles in Cornelius’ house that we heard Frank read to us this morning, Luke doesn’t want to remind us that this preacher was the man who tried to talk Jesus out of the suffering and dying part of the story—the one to whom an exasperated Jesus said, “Get thee behind me, Satan” (8:33)—the one who said to Jesus, “No, you will never wash my feet” (John 13: 8)—the one who said, “even though all become deserters, I will not” (14: 29)—and the one who said, “I do not know that man” (14:71) three times before the cock crowed. Mark’s accent is on how Jesus loved them anyway—in spite of their failings.

Like the other accounts of Easter, this one begins with women going to the cemetery in the early morning—the **same** women who had been at the foot of the cross when all the other disciples had abandoned him; the **same** women who had watched Joseph of Arimathea take the dead body down from the cross and put it into a tomb hewn out of the solid rock that lifts Jerusalem up from the surrounding desert. The **same** women who had seen the huge round stone rolled into place to seal off the place of the dead from the place of the living.

The Sabbath was past—that Sabbath that was the focus of so much of the controversy between Jesus and the tradition keepers was over—both chronologically and theologically. It just didn’t matter anymore. They are taking spices to anoint the body—although this doesn’t really make much sense after three days in the tomb—like opening the tomb of Lazarus after three days, there wasn’t much they could do now, the body would stink. It’s just the only thing they can think of left to do. On the way, they are worried about how senseless this is—they know they will never be able to roll that stone away. It would have taken a gang of strong workmen with levers and wedges to open that tomb again. Three distraught women

were not going to get it open by themselves. It says they were worried about this, but they went anyway. Or, maybe the storyteller just couldn't find words to explain that human compulsion to go to the cemetery to see the place—to cry at the final resting place—wherever it is. Even when you know that there is nothing more you can do for your loved one. Even after you have repeated, “Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.” Even when you do understand that your loved one is not there. People go. People go to see. People go to cry. People go to just be in that place.

When they arrived, the thing they had worried about most was not a problem—the stone was already rolled back—the tomb was open. They weren't the first ones there that morning? Someone else had actually come with a real plan for moving that stone? Who would it have been? Had the Romans changed their minds in the middle of the night—and come back to expose the body to the scavengers on the trash heap where most crucified criminals ended up? What ever they were expecting, this wasn't it.

They were alarmed, but not too alarmed to bend over and walk into the small doorway of the open tomb. What were they expecting to find? Mark's description transforms this dark, place of the dead into an imperial throne room, flooded with light. The ruler isn't there. The throne is empty, Jesus is not there; but standing to the right, in the place of delegated authority in the ancient world, the place where a prime minister would have stood in a throne room, is someone in a dazzling white robe. Whatever they were expecting, this wasn't it. They were even more alarmed. And the heavenly representative said, as they always do, “Don't be afraid.” I'm not sure how reassuring that might have been to these already frightened women, but he proceeded to let them know that he knew why they had come and that their errand was in vain because the crucified one was not there.

And then he gave them some instructions—instructions from the right side of the vacant throne, from that delegated place of authority. “Go and tell.” “Go and tell the disciples, and Peter, that Jesus has gone ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7). Go back to the beginning. Go back to where the story started. Remember, the prophet Isaiah told your ancestors way back in another age that in Galilee of the Nations the people who walked in darkness would see a great light. Remember, Jesus told you he would meet you in Galilee. Go back to where the disciples were called, back to where you first met him. Go back to the shores of the lake. Go back and remember. Go back and do it again. Go back and listen to all that he said to you. Go back, you will find what you are looking for. Go back; the risen Christ will be there ahead of you. Always. Wherever you go, Jesus has already been there. Wherever you go, Jesus is waiting for you to arrive. Read the story again—listen for what you missed. He told you that he would meet you in Galilee, so why are you here looking for him here? Why would you think you'd find Jesus among the dead? You must not have heard when he was telling you. Children just never listen. Now that you've been to the cross and to this empty tomb, go back and listen to the story again.

And Mark tells us the women fled in terror. The empty tomb is frightening. One thing we could count on in this world is that death is final. When it's over, it's over. The women were no longer alarmed, they were terrified. The basic fundamentals that they lived by were upended. They could not run from the tomb to go and tell. They didn't know what to tell.

They were terrified. They could not joyfully announce, “He is risen!” because they did not yet know what that meant, because they had to go back and think it out again. They had to go back and meet Jesus in Galilee where he said he would be, before they could realize exactly what the good news was—exactly what the gospel was all about. The empty tomb was just Act I of the story. And Mark leaves it for us to finish.

These women were the ones who were faithful to the end. When all the other disciples had abandoned Jesus, these women were still there—still there at the foot of the cross—still there when they laid him in the tomb—still there to discover that the body of Jesus was no longer there. But now, the faithful ones can no longer be faithful. They were told to go and tell, and they don’t. “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (16:8). Discipleship is hard. **All** the disciples fail him. **None** of them could be faithful to the end. They were so afraid.

That’s Mark’s message. Discipleship is hard. Disciples fail. Disciples are not always faithful. But God can manage anyway. It doesn’t depend on us. Mark says that these women said nothing to anyone, but the news got out. Somehow. Somehow, somebody went back to Galilee and met the risen Christ and told. And within a generation the story had spread to the edges of the empire—farther than they could have imagined. And today, Christianity continues to grow by leaps and bounds—in spite of the evidence around us here—Christianity is the fastest growing faith in the world. African congregations are baptizing thousands—just like Peter did.

This story is end-less; it has no ending. Mark leaves off with an open ended promise. On the night when everyone was abandoning him, Jesus promised to meet them in Galilee. Nothing that happened after that---not Peter’s denial or the women’s fear voids that promise. Jesus’ promise to meet them was not contingent on their behavior—or on ours. Jesus has gone ahead. Jesus will meet you wherever you are. The story is end-less, Mark declines to tell us what happened next. The story is end-less, Mark refuses to tell us what it all means. This story is end-less; it takes us back to the beginning to hear the good news one more time.

“Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news’” (1:14). The story is end-less, we are still a part of it, you are required to be a part of the story. Hear the good news, Christ is Risen! (**Christ is risen, indeed!**) Go and Tell.....